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ABSTRACT

This paper presentes a case study of an innovative class at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) in an English for Academic purposes context in which spontaneous topics raised by the learners took the place of a pre-planned syllabus. The target students were late-matriculating research students and those with particularly weak spoken English. The class, which varied in size each week, met for 1.5 hours, once a week, for 10 weeks. Questions were gathered during the beginning of the class. The resultant discussion group framework consisted of the individual's question, a small-group discussion, peer and teacher answers, and teacher feedback that involved the individual, a small group, the teacher, and the class. A mid-course student evaluation was conducted to judge the usefulness of the discussion framework to student needs. With minor changes, such as student-centered grouping versus teacher-mandated grouping and more intensive correction requested by some students, the same format was continued for the remaining class weeks. Written student evaluations at mid- and end-term suggest that the format had met most students' needs, especially for the targeted groups. It is noted that the student-centered design allowed for a diverse topic range according to the needs and preferences of the participating students. (Contains 13 references.) (NAV)

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Basing Discussion Classes on Learners' Questions: An Experiment in (Non-)Course Design

Tony Lynch (IALS)

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BASING DISCUSSION CLASSES ON LEARNERS' QUESTIONS: AN EXPERIMENT IN (NON-)COURSE DESIGN

Tony Lynch (IALS)

Abstract

In this paper I present a case study of an innovative class in an English for Academic Purposes context. What made this 'non-course' unusual was that spontaneous topics raised by the learners took the place of a pre-planned syllabus. I describe the audience and rationale for the class, analyse the topics the learners chose, and report their positive evaluation of this unfamiliar approach. Finally I outline areas for future research and development.

1. Introduction

Since 1980 IALS has run the University of Edinburgh's English Language Testing and Tuition (ELTT) programme for matriculated students taking taught or research degrees. Until the academic year 1994-95 we offered seven in-session courses, whose sequence and timing were designed principally to meet the academic language needs of students on one-year Master's courses, who make up the bulk of ELTT enrolments. We concentrated most of their English tuition into four Autumn Term courses (in listening, reading, speaking and grammar) and an intensive Christmas/New Year vacation course in writing academic papers.

The content and timing of these courses suited the majority of students, but raised a particular problem for the small number of postgraduates who join the University at the start of the second term in January: neither of the two remaining ELTT courses (in writing examination answers, and in thesis writing for second-year students) was appropriate for newly arrived research students. Every January we received a number of requests to help such students over the early part of their studies at Edinburgh. Their anxiety was increased by a feeling that they had 'missed out', not only on ELTT Courses 1-5 but also on the general induction activities for new students in the Autumn Term, such as Freshers' Week.

The alternatives open to us when dealing with these requests were to recommend students to use our self-access centre (especially if they wanted to work on listening), to provide them with dedicated IALS materials on the independent learning of English (Anderson and Lynch 1994), and/or to suggest they came back in October to join the next year's ELTT programme. Although each of these options helped to some extent, it was clear that some students went away disappointed that we had not met their expectations by giving them a place on a language course there and then.

A more specific gap in the ELTT programme was that the second term did not include a course with a focus on speaking. The solitary nature of Ph.D. work under the British system means that many first-year research students - and not only those for whom English is a second/foreign language - become isolated from staff and other students in their departments. We had received suggestions from research students and their supervisors that we should run a second-term course in oral communication for those who had not been able to get enough practice in conversation during their first term of study.

In response to these perceived problems, we decided to offer a new ELTT course in speaking in January-March 1995. This paper outlines the thinking behind its design, in particular the role of its subject matter, and assesses the evidence that the course met the participants' own requirements.

2. Course design: practice and theory

The process of designing any new course includes decisions about appropriate content. The term 'content' can be defined from various perspectives - among them grammatical, lexical, functional and procedural (Nunan 1988). Whichever perspective is adopted, the course designer faces decisions of selection and prioritisation. These are difficult enough, but the process is made more complex in a teaching situation where

some learners have already taken a number of previous courses and may well have covered some of the content, however defined, that the new course might deal with. This was the case with the new ELTT course. Some students might have attended as many as three terms of full-time tuition in the IALS General English programme, or one of our pre-sessional summer courses, before starting their degree courses. Others might have taken earlier parts of the ELTT programme.

One way of establishing what is appropriate content for a particular group of learners is to carry out a needs analysis but, as Bloor and Bloor (1988) point out, learners' objective needs do not necessarily coincide with their subjective wants. In some situations, it may be possible to negotiate the syllabus with the learners; indeed, Bloor and Bloor argue that an in-session English for Academic Purposes course (such as this one) is especially well-suited to such negotiation, since the learners share relatively similar experiences of life and language and the courses tend to be free of external constraints such as examination syllabuses.

Syllabus negotiation certainly has its attractions. However, a major obstacle in this case was that the new course would be catering for two types of student with rather different experiences and, probably, needs: (1) the late-matriculating research students, for whom this would be their first English course at Edinburgh, and (2) students who had been at Edinburgh since the beginning of the first term and who had a particular need to improve their spoken English. These different configurations of circumstance would probably mean that the two groups would have different learning priorities. However, it might be possible to harness individuals' interests in different topics in a way that would drive communicative use of the language. Experience suggested that the newly-arrived research students would have a great deal of practical questions (How, Where, When..) that could be answered by the 'old hands' and so form the basis for real content learning. I was aware that this approach carried a risk: the continuing students might not be sympathetic if the course seemed to be skewed towards the interests of the other group. Nunan (1988), writing about a theme-based English course in Australia, has reported that 'many learners are confused by content-oriented courses, thinking they have strayed into a settlement rather than a language programme' (Nupan 1988: 49).

Nevertheless, I felt it was worthwhile pursuing the goal of using a topic-based approach to the course. Apart from these local and practical arguments in favour of topic, there were two more general arguments for regarding real-world topics as a key element in course design. Firstly there is the well-established evidence from cognitive psychology (e.g. Stevick 1976) that new language items are best retained in long-term memory when the learner is actively engaged with the learning material and has some form of personal investment in the outcome.

Secondly, classroom SLA research suggests that in addition to active involvement in what is being talked about, language learners need 'abundant opportunities to control the topic of conversation and self-initiate in class ' (Johnson 1995: 85). This view is derived in particular from studies of negotiation of meaning in native-nonnative discourse which highlight the role of topic management (see, for example, the recent survey by Pica 1994). The term *management* here covers 'the participants' right to choose the topic and the way the topics are developed, and to choose how long the conversation should continue... the basic freedom to start, maintain, direct and end a conversation without conforming to a script, and without the intervention of a third party' (Bygate 1987: 36).

These two arguments were brought together in an early study by Allwright (1980), who argued that episodes of classroom interaction where the learners manage to talk (or get the teacher to talk) about <u>their</u> topics appeared to be more interesting (more involving, more real) than when the teacher maintained control of the subject matter. From observing a university-level ESL class at work, Allwright noticed that one learner, referred to as 'Igor', was 'probably more interested in contributing whenever the topic got away from the target language or the pedagogy itself' (ibid: 175). The situation in the class appeared to be one of 'a teacher patiently fostering real communication although it means digressing from the vocabulary work on her plan, and a learner apparently keen to establish the digression but not following it through to a particularly satisfactory solution' (1980: 175).

In the light of the various practical and theoretical issues sketched above, I decided that the new ELTT conversation classes should aim minimally to allow learners free choice over what they talked about and, if

possible, how long they wished to talk about it. It should also, in Allwright's terms, provide a platform for both 'real communication' and 'satisfactory solutions' to the issues discussed.

3. An experimental (non-)course: the Discussion Group

3.1 Design

I started from the assumption that everyone coming to the course would be interested in something, but not necessarily the same things, and that my job as designer and teacher was to find a way of giving them the chance to discuss whatever that something was. This seemed to me to be incompatible with the notion of a syllabus (whether imposed or negotiated); instead I would leave the choice of topics entirely to the students and ask them to announce their topic at the start of each session. This meant that the content would be 'individualised', but only in the sense that each learner contributed one topic to the pool; it would also be spontaneous, with the learners providing an off-the-cuff list of subjects, comprising whatever interested them that afternoon. As teacher, I would provide a framework (see Figure 1) within which each person could nominate a topic, talk about it with other learners, and then get feedback from me.

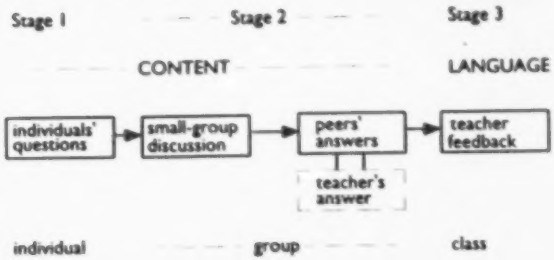

Fig.1 Discussion Group framework

The two parts of the name 'Discussion Group' were intended (1) to make clear that the focus would be on speaking and (2) to emphasise that this would not be a 'course', in the conventional sense of a series of lessons delivering a pre-planned syllabus. The advance information sent out to prospective participants explained how the Discussion Group might meet the needs of the two types of student described in section 1:

Course 6 - Discussion Group (10 sessions: 4.30-6.00 p.m. Tuesdays)
This weekly session has two aims: (1) 'trouble shooting' - allowing you to discuss any problems affecting your academic studies and (2) informal practice in conversational English. Unlike the other ELTT courses, it runs on a 'drop-in' basis and you need not attend all 10 sessions. *The discussion group should be particularly useful for graduating students who arrive too late to participate in Courses 1-5.*

3.2 Procedure

Stage 1: Questions and grouping

At the beginning of each class the students received a question sheet (see Appendix A), which asked them to write a question they wanted an answer to during that session. It could be about anything - grammar, politics, academic regulations, etc. The only criterion that I asked them to apply in selecting their topic was that it had to be something which they genuinely wanted or needed an answer to.

Once everyone had completed their sheets, I took in the 'top copy' of their question (the upper part of Appendix A) and read them through. I then grouped the learners in threes and fours, keeping apart those with the same first language and trying to ensure a mixture of levels in each group. This first stage of the class generally took 10-15 minutes.

Stage 2 - Discussion (and monitoring)

The groups then worked in parallel for the next 45 minutes or so, discussing the questions raised by their partners. As they talked, I moved from group to group, 'hovering' in the way that has become traditional for teachers monitoring learners' production in group tasks. I made notes of anything I thought might be worth commenting on at Stage 3 - grammatical errors, stylistic inappropriacies, apparent lexical gaps, and so on. If during group work a learner asked me for help with a current problem of self-expression, I gave it; but I tried not to allow my response to turn into an extended teaching episode.

Stage 3 - Feedback

The final 30 minutes were set aside for comments on their discussion. These were primarily related to language points; I mentioned points I had noted during the group work and I asked the learners themselves to report on points they remembered having had difficulty with either in listening or speaking.

I also provided two other sorts of content response where I felt it was appropriate. Firstly, when I noticed that a student appeared not to have received a 'satisfactory solution' from their peers, I gave them an answer (sometimes *the* answer, if it was a factual question) either by speaking to the student individually towards the end of Stage 2, or by including it in my comments at Stage 3. Secondly, I gave out material at Stage 3 in response to some questions if I had suitable material available. Table 1 shows the balance between these types of content response; note that these were in addition to language feedback at Stage 3 (and any responses to students' requests for language help at Stage 2).

Table 1. Responding to the content of students' questions

	Stage 2	Stage 3	
week	talked to the individual	commented to the class	provided materials
1	-	-	3
2	1	3	2
3	-	2	1
4	1	2	-
6	3	1	1
7	-	-	1
8	-	-	1
9	-	1	1
	5	9	10

Over the term a total of 21 students attended the course, with an weekly attendance of nine students. The fact that I dealt with only five topics on an individual basis shows that, as far as I could judge, the learners were getting satisfactory answers to their questions via group discussion.

3.3 Mid-course evaluation

At the halfway point in the term I surprised the students by devoting session 5 to an evaluation of the first four weeks. They worked through a series of evaluation tasks (reproduced as Appendix B), the aim of which was to see whether the consumers' views suggested I should modify or replace any of the Discussion Group

elements in the second half of the term. Given the experimental nature of the classes, I was prepared to switch to using prepared materials and a more teacher-fronted method if a majority in the class rejected the non-course approach I had adopted.

The first evaluation task asked the students to analyse the topics covered in the first four weeks. Through discussion we came up with six categories, illustrated below with actual questions from sessions 1-4:

English language - *What is the difference between 'night' and 'evening'? What is the best answer to 'Are you sure?' when I have rejected an offer?*

Language learning - *How can I improve my listening skills in English? What is the best way to increase vocabulary?*

Academic study - *What are the library databases for finding references? What is a good essay like?*

Living in Edinburgh - *What is the best way to find flatmates? Where can I buy a second-hand bike?*

British culture - *What is Scottish devolution? Do you think British people are really polite?*

The wider world - *Can you imagine moving to the country permanently? A Kenyan student told me he gets hungry quicker here and eats four times a day: is it true that the cold weather affects our body functions?*

In the second evaluation task the students had to look for any changes in the pattern of topics over the four weeks; the purpose of this task was not to attempt a rigorous analysis of the topics, but to remind the learners of the potential range of subjects they could raise in the sessions. From 'eyeballing' the topic list, they thought there was some evidence of a shift after week 2 towards the most general category ('wider world') and away from language learning strategies. Table 2 (drawn up after the evaluation session) confirms that apparent shift of interest.

Table 2. **Questions in weeks 1-4, by topic category**

week	English language	language learning	academic context	living in Edinburgh	British culture	wider world	TOTAL
1	2	2	1	2	-	2	**9**
2	3	4	1	2	2	2	**14**
3	2	1	1	2	1	7	**14**
4	3	-	-	2	2	7	**14**
(%)	**10** (20)	**7** (14)	**3** (6)	**8** (16)	**5** (10)	**18** (35)	**51**

For evaluation task 3 the students completed two simple statements to sum up their overall positive and negative feelings about the sessions so far: the first was *'What I like about the Discussion Group is...'* and the second *'I think it would be better if...'* Their responses are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Learners' responses to Evaluation Task 3

What I like about the Discussion Group is...
- it is informal / natural (2 responses)
- the chance to get information about... English (4), British culture (2), other cultures (3)
- the good method
- the opportunity to meet different people (3)
- that we can discuss what we want (3)
- it is not boring

- we can speak freely - we can talk without worrying about grammatical correctness (3) - the tips and language points raised at the end by the teacher (2) - the chance to improve oral skills - I can improve my listening
I think it would be better if...
- the group were more homogeneous (although that allows us to get used to different accents) - we were corrected more (3) - we could be grouped by the subjects we want to discuss - the class were more frequent - the questions were more substantial - we spent less time talking to each other and more time talking to the teacher - we sometimes discussed a specific topic so the teacher could give us vocabulary for it (2) - we had a short introduction with the structures that you can use - we had more time to express our opinion - I cannot think of anything (maybe everything is just perfect)

Before session 6 I was able to read through the students' written comments and the notes I had made on their group discussions (Tasks 3 and 4). Overall, there were no obvious signs of general dissatisfaction with format and method. I began session 6 by discussing two of the suggested improvements: topic-based grouping and correction. We accepted the suggestion that they - rather than I - should decide on the grouping and that groups should be based on topic, instead of level and first language.

The second issue we discussed was correction. I gave a brief summary of the findings of research into the effectiveness of teachers' correction of learners' spoken errors; I said there was limited evidence that adult learners made short-term gains in accuracy, and that these were more likely in the area of grammar than in pronunciation.

I then talked more generally about the importance of their 'noticing the gap' (Schmidt 1990) for themselves; I used a classroom transcript of communicative group work (Lynch 1996: 114) to show the potential opportunities for learners to pick up information about gaps in their own performance.

Finally, I offered to provide more intensive correction for the three students who had said they wanted it. We agreed that the best way to do that would be for them to form a separate 'correction' group for the Stage 2 discussion work. (In fact, after one session's experience of being corrected in the way they had requested, the three learners asked to be reintegrated with the rest of the class!)

3.4 Second half of the term

Apart from these adjustments to grouping, the procedure in sessions 6-9 was the same as in the first half of the term. At the final session I again asked the participants to evaluate their experience in the Discussion Group, using similar evaluation tasks to those from session 5, but as a basis for oral discussion rather than written comments.

Among other things, they were able to compare the topics covered in the first and second halves of the term, shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Questions in weeks 1-4 and 6-9, by topic area

week	English language	language learning	academic study	living in Edinburgh	British culture	wider world	TOTAL
1	2	2	1	2	-	2	**9**
2	3	4	1	2	2	2	**14**
3	2	1	1	2	1	7	**14**
4	3	-	-	2	2	7	**14**
(%)	**10** (20)	**7** (14)	**3** (6)	**8** (16)	**5** (10)	**18** (35)	**51**
6	2	1	1	1	3	1	**9**
7	-	3	1	1	1	3	**9**
8	2	1	-	1	1	1	**6**
9	-	3	-	-	1	2	**6**
	4 (13)	**8** (27)	**2** (7)	**3** (10)	**6** (20)	**7** (23)	**30**
TOTAL	**14** (17)	**15** (19)	**5** (6)	**11** (14)	**11** (14)	**25** (31)	**81**

There seemed to be no clear pattern of change over the term. The apparent shifts in popularity of 'language learning' and 'wider world' that we had noted at the mid-course session were reversed in sessions 6-9, with 'language learning' emerging as the most popular topic category in the second half of the term. This suggests that some students were looking beyond the Discussion Group and thinking about how they might continue their language progress independently. However, with these relatively small numbers of participants, we inevitably have no more than a general impression of the range of things that interested them. As we will see in section 4, there was variation both between individuals and also within the same individual in different weeks.

My notes from the evaluation session show that the subjects the learners then raised included ways of making classroom correction more effective, and the relative importance for speaking of good pronunciation and sound grammar and vocabulary. At the end of the session I gave them some 'independent learning' materials on the improvement of speaking (Anderson and Lynch 1994).

4. Discussion

4.1 Participants' response

It is not possible - nor was it my intention - to measure the success or otherwise of this innovation in quantitative terms. I was concerned more with the way a class based on individuals' topics would be perceived. For my purposes, the most appropriate criteria for judging success were that the participants should feel that (1) they had got an answer to the questions they had raised and (2) they had practised their spoken English in doing so. The written evaluations at the mid-course questionnaire and other informal comments, (e.g. 'This is the most English I have spoken in 10 months!' was one after session 1), suggest that the course did meet most learners' wants.

One way of assessing the popularity of a course is to look at the attendance figures. Of course, they offer only a rough-and-ready guide to a course's success - although Bloor and Bloor (1988) suggest that for optional in-session EAP courses like this one, attendance may actually be a reasonable measure of how appropriate the participants feel the tuition is for them.

The membership of the class changed from week to week, as envisaged at the planning stage: a total of 21 people came to at least one session. The attendance figures (see the right-hand column in Table 4) show that numbers dropped in the second half of the term. This could have been because some students were dissatisfied, although there is no clear evidence from the written comments at the mid-course session that this

was the case. A more positive reason was the one that a number of the students themselves gave, namely that in the second half of the term they were preparing for examinations and projects.

We should bear in mind that the Discussion Group was intended to meet the needs of two target groups of students - late-matriculating research students and those with particularly weak spoken English. In fact, only four of the 21 participants fell into those two categories: two late-matriculating research students, a third who had been unable to come to ELTT Courses 1-5, and a fourth who had been advised by her supervisor to continue work on her spoken English. The other participants were students who had also taken one or more of the first-term courses ELTT 1-5 and had decided to come to the Discussion Group despite relatively high overall TEAM scores. Some had enrolled for the class when they matriculated; others came to the class having heard about it from other students in their department.

It is noticeable that the four learners in the target categories formed a 'hard core' of regular attenders who came to all the sessions available to them, so there is some reason for concluding that the sessions met the perceived needs or wants of the students for whom it was primarily intended.

The attendance figures also suggest that six students seem to have 'sampled' the course for one or two sessions and then left (before the mid-course evaluation). Five of the six were from East Asia; perhaps their expectations conflicted with what the Discussion Group offered. For example, Luk (1994) reported that Chinese-speaking students taking an earlier ELTT speaking course were generally critical of communicative speaking tasks, which they summed up as 'just talking' or 'games'. It could be that this reaction would be found among learners from other East Asian countries influenced by Confucian educational values.

4.2 Topic choice

The individual profiles of topics that the regular attenders raised give some insight into their motivations in joining the Discussion Group. The questions asked by student KTa reflected the particular concerns of a newly arrived research student:

KTa

2 How to improve my English listening?
3 Should I buy a TV with teletext?
4 What's the best primary school in Edinburgh?
6 I started at the university in January. How can I attend classes in the autumn?
7 I can't clearly pronounce some sounds. How can I improve that?
8 How to make friends with British people?
9 What is the most effective method to improve my pronunciation?

KTa was clearly preoccupied with ways of improving his English, since he had not been able to take the five ELTT courses in the first term; like many other East Asian students, he was particularly worried by his relative weakness in oral skills. (In fact, pronunciation still looms large in his concerns about his English: at the time of writing, almost a year after he raised these questions in the Discussion Group, he is asking very much the same questions in the 1995-96 ELTT 2 Speaking course). We can see that KTa's questions amounted to *requests for advice*, including the one in session 4 about a suitable primary school for his children. In general, it looks as if his view of the Discussion Group coincided with the first aim set out in the course description, that of trouble-shooting, and that he valued the course as a means of getting the procedural, 'how to' knowledge that he required to settle in at Edinburgh.

On the other hand, ISp (a European M.Sc. student) was drawn to the Discussion Group primarily because of its other stated aim, that of providing practice in conversation. She was recommended to take the course by her supervisor, although she had in fact already enrolled on the course at the start of the academic year. Her topic profile gives quite a different picture of a learner's perception of the class:

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Student ISp

2 Why did you come to Edinburgh?
3 What do you like to do in your free time?
4 What is the thing you like most about your country?
6 Do you think that British people are really polite?
7 In which historical period would you like to have lived?
8 What do you think about modern art?
9 What will you do during the holiday in April?

Unlike KTa, what seemed to interest ISp were topics that would enable her to hear about other people's lives; notice that all her questions explicitly involved the addressee ('you'), in contrast to KTa's list, which focussed on 'I/my'. We might say that ISp's questions represent *invitations to interact*.

So ISp and KTa seem to be archetypes of the two target groups we had in mind when setting up the Discussion Group, judging by the way they concentrated on just one or two topic categories. The other regular participants in the class came with a broader agenda and asked questions across a wider range of categories. For example, student UFi's list of topics was as follows:

Student UFi

1 What is a good essay like?
2 What is specifically Scottish about Edinburgh life?
3 What is the difference between *night* and *evening*?
4 What topics do the British like to talking about, apart from the weather?
6 What is Valentine's Day about?
7 What do you think are the benefits of asking a non-teacher native speaker to correct your writing?
8 What is *made* and what is *done*?
9 What are the possibilities of taking part in a language class in the third term and what would it cost?

There we have examples of all the topic categories except the 'wider world'. Questions 3 and 8 were about English, dealing with pairs of terms for which UFi found no equivalent distinction in her own language. Questions 2, 4 and 6 show that she was interested - apparently more than ISp and certainly more than KTa - in finding out about the host culture, or at least in using that as a means to language practice and improvement. Unlike either of the other regulars, UFi showed a concern with one particular aspect of her current academic work (questions 1 and 7). The fact that she chose to ask for advice on writing could reflect a difference between her circumstances and those of the other two learners: ISp had taken the ELTT grammar and writing courses, and KTa had not yet had to present any written work to his supervisor. This was UFi's first opportunity to take part in ELTT.

Of course the differences among these learners' topics (and the others not analysed here) may be due to personality factors, as much as to any differences in their current needs. However, the point to stress here is that the design of the Discussion Group allowed the opportunity for these complementary topics - KTa's focus on the cognitive and linguistic, and ISp's with the affective and the interpersonal - to find expression through the freedom of choice the learners had over the subject matter at each session.

5. Future directions

At the time of writing we are about to start the Discussion Group for the 1995-6 ELTT programme and it will be interesting to see whether it is received as positively by this year's participants as this experimental version. In this paper I have concentrated on the content dimension of the Discussion Group; I have not discussed in any detail issues of language, relating to learner performance or teacher feedback. However, the session notes I made from January to March 1995 suggest three areas to follow up in the coming term.

Firstly, it would be useful to tape-record and study the negotiation process by which the learners in a discussion group actually 'manage' their chosen topics. My notes show that some students had only rudimentary means of expressing their intention to open or close a topic, or to move from one topic to the next: *'That's enough - now you'* was one example I noted down during session 3. Recording group performances would allow us to assess learners' ability to handle this aspect of discourse competence in English, and to devise appropriate learning materials if necessary.

Secondly, I would like to develop better techniques for helping to draw learners' attention to their own and others' errors, i.e. to 'notice the gap'. In my notes on session 2 I recorded my surprise at finding that when I asked the students at Stage 3 to recall any of their own expressions that they had noticed their listeners having problems understanding, not a single person was able (or willing) to do so. So in session 3 I asked them before they started Stage 2 to listen out for such problems in their discussion and to make a note of them. Every group was able to come up with at least one example, some indicating a speaker problem (e.g. pronunciation), others a listener problem (such as unfamiliarity with the word used by the speaker).

This suggests that it may be possible to 'prime' students with some form of monitoring task that will raise awareness of their own communicative effectiveness and to diagnose (and remedy?) the sources of comprehension problems. This should help to show some learners, such as the East Asians who left last year's Discussion Group before the middle of the term, that learner-led communicative tasks are a valuable means of getting feedback on their language performance.

A third potential issue for further investigation is the effect of teaching expressions relevant to certain genres of discussion. What I have in mind here is not the thematically based word lists that two students mentioned at the mid-course evaluation, but related sets of expressions appropriate to particular types of interaction: for example, for giving advice (in answering a *'What's the best way to...'* question), for introducing an anecdote or example (in a *'Do you think the British are...'* discussion), or for expressing doubt (in discussing a *'What's the difference between...'* language point).

For example, in session 4 last year I noted that, when I asked the class to think of ways of making a suggestion without using the words 'suggest' and 'suggestion', only two of the 14 students were able to. It seemed that the sort of common unmarked expressions that they must have heard native speakers use (such as *'If I were you...'* and *'Why don't you...'*) had passed them by unnoticed. Again, the Discussion Group could include feedback to help learners notice new items in communicative use.

6. Conclusion

The Discussion Group offers a practical solution, from the teacher's point of view, to the problem of what has been called the 'anarchy of expectations' (Drobnic 1978: 70, cited in Bloor and Bloor 1988) - the different wants and needs represented in even quite a small group of relatively similar individuals. The Discussion Group framework gives priority to individual choice of topic; in this sense it could be thought to reflect the recent movement towards learner autonomy and independence, and towards helping learners to take responsibility for their learning. However, the Discussion Group illustrates neither learner autonomy nor independence, but rather the devolution of responsibility (for topic) from teacher to learner.

The aim of the framework is to 'legitimise' - and even to require - the type of learner input that teachers often stigmatise in the language classroom because it is off-the-point, i.e. learner talk about what currently puzzles or concerns or annoys them. From the evidence I have discussed here, the first Discussion Group appears to have been broadly successful. I hope that the future work I have outlined here will build on this innovation within the ELTT programme, to help learners to increase the confidence that comes from meaningful practice, but also to enhance the competence that comes from 'noticing' the forms of language used in the course of topical communication.

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APPENDIX A

ELTT 6: TODAY'S QUESTION

Each week you can suggest ONE question/problem to which you would like an answer/solution. It will come from either the other members of your group or from the tutor.

Name: My question:
I am asking the question because...

.....tear ..... here .....

Now please make a second copy of the question here, for you to keep:

My question:

14

APPENDIX B

DISCUSSION GROUP session 5

Today marks the halfway point in this Discussion Group and I would like us to take stock of what we have done so far. In particular, I will be asking if you have suggestions for any improvements we might make to the content or format of the Discussion Group.

Task 1

On the yellow sheets you will find a compilation of all the questions raised during the previous four weeks. Look through them and see if you are able to divide the questions/issues into different *categories*.

Task 2

When you have discussed Task 1, see whether you can identify any changes over the four weeks in the *pattern* of questions asked.

Task 3

Without consulting the other students at your table, fill in the blue **Comment Sheet**. When you have completed it, compare and discuss your individual views.

Task 4

Look back to the questions which you yourself asked in earlier sessions. Are there any to which you feel you did not get a satisfactory answer then? If so, ask your colleagues to tell you what they think or know about the point you raised.

Task 5

Discuss any other previous questions (asked by other people) that particularly interest the members of your group.

Tony Lynch 7 Feb 1995